



## The Authentic Response: Capitalism and the Crisis of Everyday Life

Call for papers for a special issue of *ephemera: theory & politics in organization* ([www.ephemeraweb.org](http://www.ephemeraweb.org))

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The poet does not participate in the game. He stays in the corner, no happier than those who are playing. He too has been cheated out of his experience – a modern man. (Benjamin, 1940: 332)

In the early twentieth century Walter Benjamin lamented what he observed as the waning of meaningful, long-term human experience, and the upsurge in its stead of short, isolated moments of experience. He characterised such degradation in observations such as that of 'the naked man of the contemporary world who lies screaming like a newborn babe in the dirty diapers of the present' (Benjamin, 1933: 733). But Benjamin could not have foreseen what would come to pass. Today capitalist corporations are in the vanguard of attempting to re-establish this lost connection through a peculiar evocation of authenticity. From new-age spiritualism in the workplace, tokenistic difference and diversity employment policies, authentic commodities and marketing tactics, leftist eco-enterprises and so on, capitalism has recently presented authenticity as one of its leading concerns. If the crisis of everyday life made authenticity a key reference point for an emancipatory response, to an alienated world, then it seems that the sentiment of this response has itself been objectified and put to work as a commodity, business ideology and marketing stunt (Fleming, 2009).

Authenticity and its connection to recent developments in managerial ideology and practice is the topic of this special issue. We are especially concerned with the way in which authenticity – pertaining to the commodity, corporation, labour relations and so forth – represents an attempt to recompose an experience of everyday life that sutures its more traumatic components: how the failings of social structures are relocated to, and experienced in, an individual's malaise by the technology of authenticity - which then promises a means to solve them within the bounds of the individual (Adorno, 2003/1964). We suspect that the recent prominence of a 'jargon of authenticity' represents capitalism commodifying its own crisis, a fragmentation of experience precipitated by the accumulation process and an increasingly encompassing social factory. There are in particular three elements of the commodification of authenticity that we find worthy of further analysis:

- First, while born in the abnegation of rationalism in romantic thought (especially with the birth of the 'unique' individual), authenticity became an important motif in radical politics associated with humanist, existential and radical engagements with capitalism. This 'spirit' of authenticity appears to be alive and well in the plush offices of large corporations in which a kind of 'get real' slacker cool has become a guiding ethos. What happens to dissent, truth and resistance when they are solicited by the corporation, via demands for individual authenticity (for workers to just 'be themselves')? Does this change

conceptions and practices of resistance, at work? If so, what could this mean more broadly for social and political participation, especially if many modes of resistance are becoming entangled in, and conflated with, a desire for individual authenticity?

- A second element of authenticity that is of note is the way in which it is structured by a fundamental absence. The call for workers to express their unique identities found in recent business discourse, for example, turns on the assumption that all is presently not authentic, that something is missing and needs to be addressed. The same is discernible in the plethora of authentic commodities available on the market, ready to respond to consumer's cravings for the authentic. In other words, authenticity is more of a symptom of an abiding absence. What exactly is missing in the sphere of organized labour and life that might prompt this managerial response, and how does the jargon of authenticity shape perceptions of this lack at the heart of contemporary work and life? For example, does authenticity serve here to produce and instil a particular model of individual needs, capacities or desires, to be fulfilled at work and elsewhere? Here an analysis of sociality, life and joy might be important.
- And this brings us to a third observation. Attempts to render an experience, commodity or culture 'authentic' paradoxically in general rely upon something putatively outside the commodity or market. For example, authentic tourism (e.g., slum tours) crafts an experience that apparently transcends the crass commercialism of typical holiday packages, and asks for a high price as a result. Thus non-commodified forms of life are appropriated and endowed with an aura of authenticity, which puts them to work inside the market mechanism. Does this peculiar ambivalence harbour zones of instability and 'genuine' emancipatory potential to supersede the commodity-form, or is it merely yet another example of the remarkable resilience and flexibility of capitalism?

If the ideology of authenticity is a suspicious corporate response to a structural crisis of experience precipitated by capitalism itself, then this special issue aims to register a kind of counter-response. We invite papers that explore the discourse of authenticity in and around the corporation, with particular emphasis on its analysis as a symptom pertaining to a crooked reality. We are certainly not adverse to strictly philosophical meditations on authenticity, but will be particularly favourable to papers that investigate the political economy of authenticity, in the context of contemporary work and organizations. Moreover, although the editors of this special issue are suspicious of the notion of authenticity, we are also interested in the way it might be re-scripted as a progressive emancipatory stance. This could involve, for example, examining where and how a re-scripting may be carried out: in the production process perhaps – such as in the management tools exercised by workers behind the corporation's closed doors; or maybe in the consumption process – in the ways that 'shop front' staff and consumers engage. How might this re-scripting function, given authenticity's utility at present?

While certainly not exhaustive, potential topics for submissions might include:

- Authenticity as management ideology and practice
- Capitalism, contradiction and authenticity
- Authenticity and the 'experience economy'
- Authenticity and individuation at work
- Authenticity and the connection to tradition
- Glorification of authenticity
- Simulation of authenticity

- Authenticity and the 'new spirit of capitalism'
- Performance, self and dis-identification at work
- Authenticity movements in and around the workplace
- Authenticity, sight and the corporate spectacle
- Self-help, technologies of the self, and the authentic subject
- Authenticity and the cultural worker as model labourer

### **Deadline for submissions: 1 December 2009**

All contributions should be submitted to the special issue editors via email to either amurtola@abo.fi, t.edkins@qmul.ac.uk or p.fleming@qmul.ac.uk. Please note that three categories of contributions are invited: articles, notes and reviews. Information can be found at: <http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/call.htm>. Articles and notes will undergo a double blind review process. All submissions should follow *ephemera's* submission guidelines, available at: <http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/submit.htm>

### **About the editors**

Anna-Maria Murtola's PhD thesis *Against Commodification: Experience, Authenticity, Utopia* (Åbo Akademi, Finland) analyses contemporary commercial mobilisations of experience, authenticity and utopia in attempts to respond to a critique of commodification. Her research focuses on the shifting boundary between the economic and the non-economic and various conceptualisations of the relationship between the two. From September 2009 she will be teaching at Keele University.

Tim Edkins is a PhD researcher at Queen Mary University of London: where he is based in the School of Business and Management and the department of Drama. He has recently presented papers on two areas of his research: the use of performance, simulation and authenticity in state interventions, particularly in the delivery of British welfare policy aimed at reducing long-term unemployment (*Performance Studies International 14*, 2008, University of Copenhagen); and on the utility of management tools in pedagogy (*SCUDD*, 2009, Queen Mary University of London).

Peter Fleming is Professor of Work and Organization at Queen Mary College, University of London. Peter has previously held posts at the University of Melbourne and the University of Cambridge. His books include *Contesting the Corporation* (2007, Cambridge University Press), *Charting Corporate Corruption* (2009, Edward Elgar Press) and *Authenticity and the Cultural Politics of Work* (2009, Oxford University Press).

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